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Local Round Tables on Environment and Economy

A GUIDE



Ontario Round
Table on
Environment
and Economy

Table ronde
de l'Ontario sur
l'environnement
et l'économie

Ce document est disponible en français





About This Booklet

The Ontario Round Table on Environment and Economy was established by the Premier of Ontario in 1988 and asked to prepare a sustainable development strategy for the province. In addition, the Round Table's terms of reference include education and outreach to the citizens of Ontario and liaising with other round tables. In February 1991, the Round Table sponsored a workshop about an exciting new experiment: local round tables on environment and economy. The workshop, held in Huntsville in the Muskoka Lakes region, drew a diverse group of about 40 community people from across the province. It was the first opportunity for those involved or interested in local round table processes to share their thoughts and experiences.

This booklet is based on the discussions that took place at that workshop. It is designed as a practical tool for those who want to start a round table or make improvements to an existing one.

It offers a checklist of possible round table activities, including community consultation, public education, and policy review, as well as suggestions about structure and organization, including size, composition, geographic range, and decision-making process.

The booklet is not intended as a blueprint, but it should help you decide what kind of local round table would be best for your community.



Introduction

Our society faces the greatest challenge in the history of industrial civilization.

In recent years, we have become aware of the terrible damage we are inflicting on the natural environment - damage that threatens ecological life-support systems and the future availability of resources.

At the same time, we have become aware of the total inadequacy of current after-the-fact measures. Instead, we know that a truly sustainable future can be achieved only by anticipating and preventing damage. *We must integrate environmental principles into the structure of the economy and decision-making processes.*

How are we going to meet this challenge?

Round tables are part of the answer.

ROUND TABLES

Simply defined, a round table on environment and economy is a "multi-sectoral" organization that builds consensus about the changes needed to attain an environmentally sustainable economy. A round table also works to promote these changes.

A round table's main role is to create a process for generating new ways of thinking and measuring community progress towards sustainability.

A round table also:

- provides a forum for mutual understanding and fresh perspectives by including all sectors of society and all points of view;
- helps to re-orient decision-makers to the goals and principles of sustainability;
- strategizes about the means of implementing sustainability and serves as a catalyst for action;
- helps to integrate the efforts of business, government, and non-governmental organizations to achieve sustainability.

Round tables are one response to the call for new institutions in the 1987 report of the U.N.'s World Commission on Environment and

Development, chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland of Norway.

After a visit from the Brundtland Commission, Canada formed the National Task Force on Environment and Economy. This task force recommended that each of the provinces establish a round table on environment and economy, a recommendation that has since been implemented. A national round table also has been established.

LOCAL ROUND TABLES

Now, communities all around Ontario are establishing local round tables on environment and economy.

Like the provincial and national organizations, a local round table works to build consensus and promote action on sustainable development. But a local round table has certain advantages. It is close to ordinary people and their daily lives. It can draw the community into discussions about sustainability and steps to achieving it.

A local round table can help to build the bottom-up support that is needed for effective change. And, it can also help to adapt top-down initiatives to local conditions.

Most importantly, however, it can help to harness the ability of the community to "think globally and act locally". A local round table can promote action by local government. And it can help people to make changes in their own lives, in their homes, their neighbourhoods, their businesses, and their offices.

Future generations of people around the world have the right to share the bounty and beauty of nature, while at the same time enjoying economic prosperity. The work of local round tables is one means of achieving the transformation that is necessary so that future generations can exercise that right.



What Does a Local Round Table Do?

Communities that are planning to start a round table could begin by striking a committee or task force to investigate and report on the idea.

The committee could:

- discuss alternative models for a round table;
- identify important local issues that could be addressed;
- consult with the community to determine the level of interest and support, and priorities for action;
- clarify the potential relationship between a round table and local governments, including the advisory role and degree of influence;
- publish a brief report that recommends terms of reference and preliminary directions for the round table.

It's a good idea to plan for some practical accomplishments early in the life of the round table to help maintain morale while the structural details are being worked out.

Although all local round tables work to build social consensus and promote change, they vary considerably in the mix of activities they undertake to accomplish these goals. The following activities are presented as a menu of choices.

CONSULTING THE COMMUNITY

Round tables need to reach out to the community in order to build consensus and promote action. They can do this by:

- holding public meetings and problem-solving workshops;
- soliciting public input to documents (agendas, policy papers), distributing drafts for comment, and revising the documents based on the input;
- establishing task forces and special committees to achieve broader community participation;
- arranging meetings with community organizations.

Public consultation programmes must be carefully planned and managed. Here are some tips for good process:

Keep in mind the needs of the public with whom you are consulting. Don't hold meetings during the day when people are at work. Consider the need for child care, translation services, and wheelchair access. Hold meetings in an accessible location. Advertise properly. Provide all the necessary background information well in advance.

Clarify the subject and the context. What are you consulting about? Why are you consulting? What are you going to do with the results? Make sure you explain the round table and its role in the decision-making process.

GETTING STARTED

Given their varied backgrounds and interests, local round table members usually speak from a wide range of perspectives. Before they do anything else, members need to talk among themselves to identify common ground, build trust, and dispel the myths they have about one another.

The round table members should develop a vision statement or a list of principles for implementing sustainability.

Members must explore the meaning of key terms like “sustainability”. Speakers, films, books, reports, and articles can be used to stimulate discussion.

However, it is important not to get mired in abstract concepts or disagreements based on semantics rather than substance. Members will become bored and frustrated by the lack of action. You need to strike a balance between the need for discussion and the need to move on to practical accomplishments.

SETTING AN AGENDA

Local round tables can construct an agenda for implementing sustainability in all sectors of the community.

One approach is to form task forces to recommend action in various issue areas - for example, energy, waste, land-use, and transportation. Targets and timelines should be included to make the recommendations more specific.

A sustainability strategy should include a range of suggested actions, from quick and easy initiatives to major changes in the economy, the regulatory system, and decision-making. The strategy should outline a vision of a sustainable future and incremental steps to achieve that vision.

In developing an agenda, round tables can use personal contacts to identify opportunities for action based on the concerns and interests of community decision-makers.

Follow-up is needed. The agenda can be used for public education, internal planning by the round table, and lobbying. The sectors can be asked to indicate how they plan to implement the agenda and its principles. Action opportunities should be pursued by providing advice and encouragement, and making links among community actors that can work together.

REVIEWING POLICIES AND PROPOSALS

Although they seldom have a formal role in reviewing routine decisions by local governments, round tables are well-placed to provide comment and advice with respect to certain key initiatives, for example:

- a major proposal for a new industry, facility, or subdivision,
- an environmental “master plan” for a municipality or school board,
- an updated Official Plan covering land use,
- a municipal parks plan, Waste Management Master Plan, Remedial Action Plan to clean up a water body or contaminated site, or other environment-related plan.

Further, local governments now are frequently consulted by provincial and federal Governments on environment and economy issues. The round table can assist in developing input to commissions, policy reviews, and other consultative exercises.

DEVELOPING POLICIES

Rather than waiting to be asked, round tables can scrutinize local government activities, conduct research, offer critiques, and recommend new policies, plans, and initiatives.

Possible topics include alternate transportation policies, procurement policies, and a green economic development strategy.

Round tables also can propose changes in structure and process such as environmental impact assessment or staff training and development.

MONITORING REPORTS AND DATA

The local economy and environment is monitored and analyzed by various agencies, departments, and non-governmental organizations. The round table can receive reports and data from these sources on a regular basis, discuss the implications, and make recommendations to municipal councils and other bodies.

Authors of technical reports can be invited to explain the contents in lay terms. If the meeting is open, this will increase public access to information, awareness, and understanding.

STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT REPORTING

State of the environment reports (SOE) provide qualitative and quantitative indicators of ecological health. They help to measure progress and identify persistent problems. State of the environment reports also are useful in developing specific targets, standards, and limits for environmental protection.

Ideally, SOE reports should be undertaken regularly - every two, three, or five years - in order to track emerging trends and provide feedback on the effectiveness of environmental protection measures.

SOE reporting is probably too much work for most round tables to undertake on their own. However, round tables can help to determine the indicators that need to be included.

ADDRESSING SPECIFIC ISSUES

Round tables sometimes become directly involved in local sustainability issues. They can:

- act as a go-between, conveying citizen concerns to the appropriate authority, and conveying a response from the authority back to citizens;
- investigate various sides of the issue and make their own assessment and recommendation;
- assume an advocacy role, especially where there is agreement in the community about the appropriate action;
- make use of personal contacts with decision-makers to urge action.

EDUCATING THE PUBLIC

The public can be educated about environment-economy issues through speakers, conferences, and special events, such as environmental fairs.

Publications are another option - for example, an eco-tour designed to raise awareness of ecological assets and threats, or a booklet that discusses sustainability and the links between environment and economy at the local level.

DISSEMINATING SKILLS AND INFORMATION

Round tables can be a vehicle for transferring detailed, practical information about environment-friendly measures. They can do this by:

- holding how-to workshops and training sessions;
- reaching out into the community to provide practical advice to people in their homes, neighbourhoods, businesses, clubs and associations;
- sponsoring demonstration projects;
- maintaining a lending library of how-to materials;
- publishing original materials;
- disseminating information about government programmes;
- working with community colleges and others to develop training programmes for job skills such as energy conservation and waste reduction.

NETWORKING

Round tables can facilitate networking to keep community sectors abreast of each other's environmental and economic related activities. Networking identifies gaps, overlaps, and opportunities for co-operation. It often generates new ideas and inspires enthusiasm for action.

Networking can be encouraged by:

- scheduling a portion of each round table meeting for updates from sectors;
- sponsoring special community networking meetings or fairs;
- publishing a regular newsletter;
- publishing a contact list of local organizations and individuals with relevant concerns, skills, and knowledge.

RECOGNIZING SUCCESS STORIES

Awards are a means of praising commendable actions by individuals, businesses, and institutions. They encourage others to follow suit.

Clear selection criteria are needed. Awards should recognize a *specific initiative* that promotes sustainability.

Awards can be handled in various ways, including a regular newspaper column, a rotating window display, or an annual ceremony.

PROMOTING THE ROUND TABLE CONCEPT

Promote your round table by printing and distributing a pamphlet, holding public meetings, issuing frequent news releases on your activities, and setting up information tables at malls or fairs.

A regular newsletter is another option. However, newsletters are labour-intensive and should be undertaken only if adequate resources are available.

An annual report provides a public account of your activities and also will help the round table to take stock of its accomplishments over the year.

RESOLVING CONFLICTS

Some local round tables have become involved in resolving local conflicts between environmentalists and business interests.

A local round table can bring the parties together, facilitate discussions, and help search for mutually agreeable solutions. The round table can help to define terms and conditions for negotiations and coach the parties on effective negotiating techniques.

The round table also can offer a fact-finder's report - a neutral accounting of the facts and arguments surrounding the dispute, which may include recommendations for a settlement.

However, conflict resolution requires considerable skill. Be sure you have the necessary resources before you decide to get involved.

Emphasize your role as a neutral third party, and that the solution must further sustainable development goals.

ENHANCING THE ENVIRONMENT

In general, round tables try to influence the activities of other agencies and organizations rather than implement environmental improvement projects of their own. However, you may want to undertake small hands-on projects as a means of building the morale and profile of the round table. Possibilities include:

- cleaning up a stream,
- making habitat improvements in a local park,
- sponsoring a Great Tree Hunt to identify heritage trees,
- sponsoring a household hazardous waste day.

Ideally, such activities should point toward the integration of environment and economy through the principle of prevention as opposed to remedial action.



How a Local Round Table is Organized

Local round tables vary in the details of structure and organization. The following section addresses some of the issues to consider in developing a model that reflects what you want to accomplish.

SECTORAL REPRESENTATION

In order to build consensus and promote change, a round table needs to include representation from a wide variety of community sectors, including:

- industry, business, and financial institutions,
- tourism, recreation, cottagers,
- labour, professional associations,
- service clubs, ethnic and cultural associations,
- agriculture,
- environmentalists, naturalists, consumers,
- scientists, technical experts,
- youth, students, seniors,
- faith communities,
- native communities,
- municipal governments (politicians, staff),
- school boards (politicians, staff),
- other educational institutions (university, community college),
- electrical utilities,
- conservation authority,

- provincial government (MPP, staff of agencies such as Ministry of the Environment, Ministry of Natural Resources),
- federal government (MP, staff of agencies such as Environment Canada).

Balance is a key objective. Appointments also should seek to achieve geographic representation, a mix of knowledge and skills, gender balance, and ethnocultural variety.

OFFICIAL RECOGNITION

It is advantageous to get official recognition from your municipality, and possibly other decision-making bodies.

Recognition could take the form of a simple resolution endorsing the round table and the principles of sustainability.

Official recognition will help to clarify your status when you offer advice. It may also prove useful when you seek financial support.

SELECTION OF MEMBERS

A round table needs committed, capable members. Members should be representative of their sectors. They should be willing to act as a two-way link between the round table and their sectors.

Sometimes, round tables members are appointed by a municipal government or a mayor. While this reduces control by the round table, it may result in a closer relationship with the municipality and correspondingly greater influence and support.

In other cases, round tables appoint their own members, at the pleasure of the chair or a vote of the membership. This gives the body control over its composition.

Community organizations can be asked to suggest who from their group should sit on the round table. However, it is important to make clear that a round table member represents a *perspective*, not an *organization*. A member should be free to participate according to his or her own judgement.

Other methods of finding round table members are public advertising and a nominating committee.

A job description, including qualifications and selection criteria, should be drafted and given to potential round table members.

TERMS OF OFFICE

Setting terms of office for round table members establishes an outside limit on time commitment that some volunteer members will appreciate. It also will help you to anticipate the need to find new members as the current ones retire. And it allows for a change in membership, particularly as new skills are required. Terms can be staggered to avoid excessive turnover in a single year.

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

Local round tables can cover an area ranging in size from a single municipality to an entire region. A watershed or other ecosystem can be an environmentally appropriate basis for determining the boundaries.

Round tables covering larger areas can promote much-needed interjurisdictional cooperation, for example, between a city and adjacent rural municipalities.

Round tables should move their meeting place occasionally to demonstrate a commitment to the entire area they serve.

SIZE

A dozen members is usually the minimum needed to provide broad-based community representation.

More members will provide for broader representation and a larger pool of volunteers. But if the round table gets too large, responsibility is diluted, consensus decision-making becomes more difficult, and the round table may become difficult to manage. Two dozen members is generally a good maximum.

Additional participants can be brought into the process through subcommittees or special projects.

CHAIR(S)

The choice of chair - especially the founding chair - will greatly influence success.

Rather than appoint a single chair, you could appoint two co-chairs, one representing the environmental sector, the other representing the economic sector. This helps to ensure balance of viewpoint and operating flexibility.

SUBCOMMITTEE STRUCTURE

Standing committees can be formed in larger communities to address issue areas, for example, greenspace and habitat, transportation, energy, and water quality and quantity.

Alternatively, subcommittee responsibilities can be divided according to the constituency they address, for example, business and industry (local businesses), policy and planning (local government), and community liaison (non-governmental organizations and the general public).

In addition, an executive committee can be formed to help set agendas, develop budgets, and make minor decisions between meetings.

PARTICIPATION

Many round tables have experienced a problem in getting certain sectors to participate fully. Subcommittees can be formed to target the concerns of those sectors and draw in additional representatives. The enthusiastic participation of sectoral leaders can help to promote participation. Round tables need to be sensitive to and deal with members who don't contribute to the discussion or stop attending meetings.

EXTERNAL RELATIONS

Communication with other round tables, including regular exchanges of minutes, can be a source of ideas and inspiration.

Check with neighbouring communities to compare notes about sustainability strategies so as to avoid conflicts.

FREQUENCY OF MEETINGS

Local round tables customarily meet once a month, with additional monthly meetings for subcommittees.

OPEN OR CLOSED MEETINGS

If meetings are closed to the public and news media, members can speak their minds and discuss new ideas without fear of adverse publicity.

On the other hand, a round table arguably belongs to the community it serves, and the community has a right to know what goes on. Open meetings help to publicize the round table's activities, educate the community, and build support.

Allowing public delegations enhances participation, allows new thoughts to enter the process, and helps to ensure that the round table reflects community concerns. Set aside time on each agenda for contributions from non-members.

BUDGET AND FUNDING

Local round tables rely heavily on volunteer labour and donations from government, business, and members. However, there are limits to what can be accomplished without secure, adequate financial resources. Basic budgetary needs include:

- secretarial assistance for minutes and correspondence,
- photocopying,
- stamps,
- long-distance telephone charges,
- advertising and promotion,
- travel costs where the round table covers an extensive area,
- travel and registration fees to attend conferences.

Additional budgetary needs include funding for staff and activities such as research, educational campaigns, special projects, task forces, and conference organizing.

If a local round table is officially recognized, a municipal government should be approached to provide funding and can be asked to provide staff support. A secretary may be assigned to take minutes.

Other municipal staff - an engineer, planner, recycling coordinator, or environmental coordinator - could be designated to work with the round table on a regular basis.


Round tables also may be able to raise funds for special projects from local businesses and members of the public or apply for assistance under provincial and federal programs.

DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Round tables can make decisions in the conventional manner, with resolutions and voting. However, the consensus-building function of local round tables suggests a commitment to go beyond majority rule and attempt to reach conclusions that all members of the round table at the least "can live with".

Consensus decision-making does not necessarily mean unanimous agreement by all round table members. The precise definition must be determined by the group. But consensus does imply a strong commitment to incorporate minority views. Members work together creatively to find "win-win" solutions that address all objections and concerns.

Another option is to use consensus decision-making process followed by a vote to confirm the decision.



Final Word

Local round tables are still relatively new and experimental, and even some of the older ones are still struggling to clarify questions of mandate, format, and structure. So don't be discouraged if your round table experiences some difficulties. It's an evolutionary process.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information, contact:

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Representatives from the following local round tables, communities and organizations participated in the workshop that formed the basis for this booklet:

Burlington Sustainable
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Centre for Sustainable Development,
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Citizens Acting Now

City of Brantford

City of Oshawa

City of Ottawa

City of Peterborough

City of Stratford

Clean North

County of Brant

Ecovision

Guelph Round Table

Haldimand Norfolk Organization
for a Pure Environment

Hamilton-Wentworth Task Force on
Sustainable Development

Hearst Round Table

Les Amis-e-s tu Nord

London Round Table Committee

Muskoka Round Table

Niagara Environmental and Ecological
Advisory Committee

North Simcoe Environment Watch

Ontario Public Health Association

Ottawa-Carlton Greenprint Committee

Peterborough Committee on
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Notes



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